

Ottawa must intervene in pipeline dispute; Alberta and B.C. squabble

The Toronto Star

February 8, 2018 Thursday

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Section: EDITORIAL; Pg. A14

Length: 922 words

Body

Few issues divide the world into absolutist camps like the question of pipelines.

In one corner are those who say, no more, under any circumstances; the existential threat of climate change and the economic imperative to invest in technologies of the future, not those of the past, require an outright moratorium and a speedy pivot toward renewable sources of energy.

In the other corner are those who say we'd be foolish to squander our great natural advantage while we still have it; the clock is ticking on fossil fuels, most agree, so let's do everything in our power now to diversify and expand the market, reaping the economic bounty and protecting jobs for as long as we can.

Some version of this ideological divide can actually be seen on the Canadian map, the border between British Columbia and Alberta delineating two provinces engaged in an escalating feud over the future of pipelines.

The current bone of contention is the expansion of the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline, which Ottawa approved in 2016. B.C. Premier John Horgan, continuing his province's long-standing opposition to the project, announced last week that his government would seek to halt crude oil shipments through the province while it undertook a study of the potential effects of a spill. Trans Mountain was not mentioned in the announcement, though it was clearly the target.

In response, Alberta Premier and fellow New Democrat Rachel Notley, who says delays to the pipeline are costing her government \$1.5 billion annually, called off a potential purchase by her province of British Columbia electricity and, on Tuesday, imposed a ban on the import of B.C. wines, a move that could cost her western neighbour as much as \$160 million a year.

This ugly dispute and incipient trade war, understandable as it is unfortunate, is bad news for both provinces and for the country as a whole. Ottawa, which has a constitutional responsibility for cross-border pipelines and for the national interest more generally, must now intervene by ensuring that Trans Mountain is pursued without further delay, while easing the understandable concerns of those who oppose it.

The Trudeau government, in particular, is well placed to do this, having sought to stake out a middle way on this fraught and polarizing issue. At the same time as it approved Kinder Morgan, for instance, it killed the widely derided Northern Gateway pipeline, rightly arguing that the project would have unacceptably endangered some of Canada's most pristine wilderness. It has made a credible though no doubt controversial case that, at this moment, some pipelines are in the national interest and some not.

While not without real environmental risks, many experts agree Trans Mountain's route, which is already established, is far less problematic than, say, the Northern Gateway proposal. Moreover, the economic benefits of the project are hard to deny. The federal government estimates that Trans Mountain will triple Canada's capacity to

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get oil to international markets beyond the United States, where it fetches a significantly higher price, and create thousands of jobs in the process, particularly, of course, in struggling Alberta.

On whichever side of the pipeline debate one falls, this last point is doubly important. As Notley has compellingly argued, there can be no meaningful national climate action without Alberta and no Alberta buy-in without federal sensitivity to the integral importance of pipelines to that province's economy.

None of this is to diminish British Columbians' concerns. People in that province can be forgiven for doubting the process that led to Trans Mountain's rubber-stamping. After all, in opposition, the Liberals decried the National Energy Board's review process as inadequate, promising to rejig the agency and then resubmit the pipeline proposal for approval. In the coming days, more than two years later, the Trudeau government will finally unveil its new, improved process, which promises more robust scientific reviews and a stronger voice for Indigenous peoples. While welcome, this may ironically shine a spotlight on Trudeau's unfulfilled campaign commitment.

That broken promise no doubt laid the groundwork for the interprovincial squabble he now must referee. Nor has it helped soothe environmentalists that Trudeau has yet to provide any comprehensive accounting or balance sheet to support his claim that such projects are consistent with our climate targets.

If Ottawa exerts its jurisdictional authority, as it should, the Trudeau government will inevitably pay a political price in British Columbia. That price could have been lower, as the Star has previously argued, had Trudeau done more to secure social licence for the pipeline before approving it. Even now, Ottawa must do more to work with B.C. to address the province's legitimate concerns, particularly by pledging help to strengthen environmental safeguards.

Still, the federal government has determined with good reason that Trans Mountain is in the national interest. And that is unambiguously its determination to make. It is Trudeau's job to ensure that no province stands in the way.

More than that, in the case of this pipeline and beyond, as Trudeau seeks the middle way, it is his job to assure Albertans (and all Canadians) that the inevitable transition away from fossil fuels will be handled deliberately and humanely, while assuring British Columbians (and all Canadians) that, for economic and moral reasons, the transition is indeed inevitable and underway.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: CLIMATE CHANGE (89%); DELAYS & POSTPONEMENTS (89%); REPORTS, REVIEWS & SECTIONS (79%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (77%); TRADE DISPUTES (77%); ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT (76%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (72%); CRUDE OIL MARKETS (69%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (59%); BEVERAGE EXPORTS & IMPORTS (50%); WILDERNESS (50%)

Company: KINDER MORGAN INC (56%)

Ticker: KMI (NYSE) (56%)

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Industry: NAICS486210 PIPELINE TRANSPORTATION OF NATURAL GAS (56%); NAICS221210 NATURAL GAS DISTRIBUTION (56%); ENERGY & UTILITIES (89%); PIPELINE TRANSPORTATION (78%); ALTERNATIVE & RENEWABLE ENERGY (76%); ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT (76%); FOSSIL FUELS (76%); CRUDE OIL MARKETS (69%); BEVERAGE EXPORTS & IMPORTS (50%)

Geographic: OTTAWA, ON, CANADA (88%); ALBERTA, CANADA (90%); BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA (88%); CANADA (93%)

Load-Date: February 8, 2018

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